

A Tribute to Dispatchers

Someone once asked me if I thought that answering telephones for a living was a profession. I said, "I thought it was a calling."

And so is dispatching. I have found in my law enforcement career that dispatchers are the unsung heroes of public safety. They miss the excitement of riding in a speeding car with lights flashing and sirens wailing. They can only hear of the bright orange flames leaping from a burning building. They do not get to see the joy on the face of worried parents as they see their child begin breathing on its own, after it has been given CPR.

Dispatchers sit in darkened rooms looking at computer screens and talking to voices from faces they never see. It's like reading a lot of books, but only half of each one.

Dispatchers connect the anxious conversations of terrified victims, angry informants, suicidal citizens, and grouchy officers. They are the calming influence of all of them—the quiet, competent voices in the night that provide the pillars for the bridges of sanity and safety. They are expected to gather information from highly agitated people who can't remember where they live, what their name is, or what they just saw. And then, they are to calmly provide all that information to the officers, firefighters, or paramedics without error the first time and every time.

Dispatchers are expected to be able to do five things at once—and do them well. While questioning a frantic caller, they must type the information into a computer, tip off another dispatcher, put another caller on hold, and listen to an officer run a plate for a parking problem. To miss the plate numbers is to raise the officer's ire; to miss the caller's information may be to endanger the same officer's life. But, the officer will never understand that.

Dispatchers have two constant companions, other dispatchers and stress. They depend on one, and try to ignore the other. They are chastened by upset callers, taken for granted by the public, and criticized by the officers. The rewards they get are inexpensive and infrequent, except for the satisfaction they feel at the end of a shift, having done what they were expected to do.

Dispatchers come in all shapes and sizes, all races, both sexes, and all ages. They are blondes, and brunettes, and redheads. They are quiet and outgoing, single, or married, plain, beautiful, or handsome. No two are alike, yet they are all the same.

They are people who were selected in a difficult hiring process to do an impossible job. They are as different as snowflakes, but they have one thing in common. They care about people and they enjoy being the lifeline of society—that steady voice in a storm, the one who knows how to handle every emergency and does it with style and grace; and, uncompromised competence.

Dispatchers play many roles: therapist, doctor, lawyer, teacher, weatherman, guidance counselor, psychologist, priest, secretary, supervisor, politician, and reporter. And few people must jump through the emotional hoops on the trip through the joy of one caller's birthday party, to the fear of another caller's burglary in progress, to the anger of a neighbor blocked in their drive, and back to the birthday caller all in a two-minute time frame. The emotional rollercoaster rolls to a stop after an 8- or 10-hour shift, and they are expected to walk down to their car with steady feet and no queasiness in their stomach—because they are dispatchers. If they hold it in, they are too closed. If they talk about it, they are a whiner. If it bothers them, it adds more stress. If it doesn't, they question themselves, wondering why.

Dispatchers are expected to have:

the compassion of Mother Theresa

the wisdom of Solomon

the interviewing skills of Oprah Winfrey

the gentleness of Florence Nightingale

the patience of Job

the voice of Barbara Streisand

the knowledge of Einstein

the answers of Ann Landers

the humor of David Letterman

the investigative skills of Sgt. Joe Friday

the looks of Melanie Griffith or Don Johnson

the faith of Billy Graham

the energy of Charo

and the endurance of the Energizer Bunny

Is it any wonder that many drop out during training? It is a unique and talented person who can do this job and do it well. And, it is fitting and proper that we take a few minutes or hours this week to honor them for the job that each of them does. That recognition is overdue and it is insufficient. But, it is sincere.